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Where Propaganda Lives On

Introduction

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Marked by high polarization and the dissemination of falsehoods via online platforms, contemporary media ecosystems are being used by a plethora of political actors to manipulate people's perceptions of reality. Over the last decades the propagation of fake information mostly via social media has been labelled disinformation or fake news, concepts that we argue may not be the most adequate to fully understand how such practices impact public opinion and how they differ from other used in the past. We call for the concept of propaganda to be reconsidered as a theoretical construct used to problematize the different strategies and tactics used in the digital environment by actors aiming to deceive different publics.

Keywords: disinformation, fact-checking, manipulation, propaganda

As multiple places around the globe are dealing with the effects of rampant disinformation and misinformation, propaganda is being revealed as a concept before its time. Widely associated with the falsehoods, manipulation, and brainwashing that often accompany wartime, propaganda has been generally seen as a negative phenomenon describing the practices of "others" who aim to deceive individuals, groups and societies.

But this connotation is far from universal. While states, organizations, and groups in the Global North typically reject descriptions of their own activity as propaganda, in many geographies of the Global South, propaganda is understood as a more ongoing and expected outcome of political messaging and commercial advertising, one that is anticipated to require workarounds. Propaganda techniques have undoubtedly become more sophisticated with time, but their success often depends on how much they resonate with already familiar techniques used at earlier times. The emergence of widespread propaganda networks to spread lies and distortions—exemplified by Russia's current efforts across most of Africa and Latin America or by overly broad assessments, like one recently offered in the write-up of a German Marshall

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Fund report (Standish, 2023) that China and Russia "are cooperating on propaganda more than ever"—highlights the uneven strategic value that such networks provide for the countries that are included or excluded from the alliance. Thus, where we speak of propaganda matters.

Regardless of its meaning, propaganda has always played a central role in human societies, performed by political, economic, religious, cultural, and social agents who aim to mold public opinion and people's perception of reality. With profound historical roots, it became even more prevalent with the emergence of the mass media, which from the beginning were expected to function as tools for promoting political ideologies and mobilizing for war. The prevalence of propaganda and its usage as a tool of war has led several disciplines to develop a special interest in studying the phenomenon, from history to journalism and media studies but also political science, psychology, and sociology. In the case of media and communication studies, propaganda became central to the field's research agenda even before its institutionalization, with pioneering scholars in the study of communication dedicating particular attention to the phenomenon of political propaganda. While Harold Lasswell (1927) published *Propaganda Technique in the World War* in 1927, a few years earlier Walter Lippmann (1922/1991) had already dedicated significant attention to what he labelled "the manufacture of consent" (p. 248), where he designated the act of managing information as one designed to achieve a specific response from its receivers. For Lippmann (1922/1991), the media played a significant role in shaping public opinion by publishing information that made use of myths and symbols leading to the creation of stereotypes used by people to interpret the world. Still, according to Lippmann (1922/1991), for propaganda to affect people's perception of reality, a barrier was needed between the public and the event: "Under certain conditions [people] respond as powerfully to fictions as they do to realities," he observed, adding that "in many cases they help to create the very fictions to which they respond" (p. 14).

Criticized by many who consider his views undemocratic regarding the role of experts in guiding public opinion, Lippmann's work seems to capture the nature of much that is happening in today's media landscapes, where anonymous citizens are not only exposed to false information but also participate in its dissemination through social media, in what has been labeled "participatory propaganda" (Wanless & Berk, 2020). Such participation is not necessarily intentional. On the contrary, many publics have the predisposition to share false information because it is more entertaining in comparison with real world facts that tend to be more tedious (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). This demonstrates that fake content is not only shared by those who aim to benefit from it but also by individuals who find it worth sharing for other reasons.

Even though we argue that scholarship on propaganda may help us understand the different strategies and tactics used today in the digital environment by actors aiming to deceive different publics, the concept has been rarely applied to understand the contemporary information landscape. The reasons are twofold. First, the field of communication and media studies has a presentist bias or what has been described as "historical amnesia" (e.g., Curran, 1993; Pickering, 2015), which positions it on the lookout for new concepts to explain new forms of communication. Second, the negative connotation acquired by the concept, especially after World War II, led to a significant decrease in the usage of the word in academic research and publications. As shown in Figure 1 of books published in the English language, the term "propaganda" peaked during the early 1940s and dropped continuously until the end of the Cold War, then demonstrating a small surge in the mid-2010s with the resurgence of populist leaders whose discourses

resembled those of the fascist interwar period. This gave rise to the publication of several works comparing contemporary populist leaders with those of the 1920s and 1930s (e.g., Ben-Ghiat, 2020; Finchelstein, 2019; Stanley, 2018).

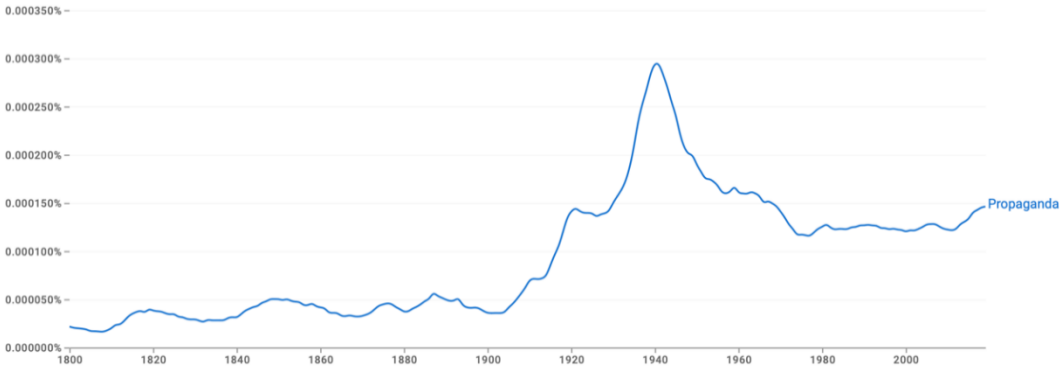

Figure 1. Ngram for "Propaganda" in English language (1900–2019).

The fact that propaganda became a damaged word after World War II led to the emergence of new concepts for describing the management of information and the promotion of specific worldviews by both state and nonstate actors. Governments no longer admitted practicing propaganda and instead described their campaigns to promote national interests abroad as "public diplomacy"—a concept coined by Edward Gullion in 1965 (Cull, 2006), while political and economic actors also refused to use the term to describe their practices even when the second half of the 20th century saw an explosion of messages of persuasion from political parties and commercial companies. The fact that they intended to sell ideas and ideologies along with services and products might have alerted scholars differently.

Thus, propaganda was set aside in Western academia, except when used to describe the practices of the Soviet Union and its allies, and rejected by those who refused to have their actions labeled as propagandistic. With the presumed end of the Cold War by the early 1990s, the concept of propaganda was deemed obsolete. Thus, despite the practice of propaganda being prevalent in contemporary media landscapes, marked by high polarization and a profusion of platforms for the instantaneous sharing of information, including falsehoods, other concepts have been used to describe the communication strategies that are central to the manipulation of public opinion, with disinformation and fake news being two of the most notorious. While the latter is not the most useful to understand the contemporary informational landscape for mixing intentional and unintentional false information, the former is a concept coined by the KGB during the Cold War, when it created the department *Dezinformatsiya* dedicated to the production and dissemination of false information to be planted in foreign media so that it would not be traced back to the Soviet bloc. This is consonant with what propaganda scholars in the past have labeled "black propaganda," that takes place when both the information and the source to which it is attributed are false, and that was used extensively during World War II and the Cold War, just as it is used today on digital media.

In the contemporary information landscape, propaganda is easily disseminated and customized to allow its purveyors to reach specific targets in the context of wars, election campaigns, health crises, and

conflicts over identity and inclusion. Over the last decade, social media have become the main tools for disseminating not only state propaganda but also the sentiments of a wide set of interest groups designed to interfere in affairs by spreading untruthful narratives. The impact of such narratives is enhanced by echo chambers and filter bubbles that play a central role in promoting disinformation and polarizing online communities (Tripodi, 2022).

While such activity was apparent in multiple regions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the political turbulence surrounding elections, mounting racial, gendered, and ethnic violence as well as the invasion of Ukraine and the war in Gaza all point to a lingering resistance—at least in the Global North—to address these phenomena as propaganda. For many, propaganda is seen as a thing of the past, despite its very real existence in these unstable times. The articles in this Special Section prove otherwise and use the concept of propaganda as a lens to examine different objects of study, from Turkish Cypriot children's magazines in the mid-1960s and Chinese schoolbooks in the 80s and 90s to news reports on the 2022 Russian bombing of a maternity in Mariupol and the gender politics and fact-checking discourses in China and Hong Kong during the COVID-19 pandemic. All articles are expanded versions of papers presented at the 3rd edition of the Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication, jointly organized by the faculty of human sciences at the Catholic University of Portugal and the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for Communication (University of Pennsylvania), in coordination with the Chinese University of Hong Kong's School of Journalism and Communication, the Annenberg Schools at the University of Southern California and the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Helsinki's Institute for Social Sciences and Humanities.

This Special Section demonstrates that propaganda is still with us, living on in new, old, and hybrid forms. The discussions that follow differentiate its study by time and space. Time is reflected in the first two articles, which address the relevance of generational understanding, where propaganda is shown to cross generations effectively by targeting age groups through the media that make the most sense to them. Space is reflected in the three articles that follow, which use various contexts of reception to assess the ways in which propaganda spreads spatially. Whether it is the pandemic or the invasion of Ukraine, how propaganda unfolds depends on the circumstances in which it does so.

In the opening article, "Long Live Chairman Mao: Propaganda About Mao Zedong in Chinese Primary School Textbooks (1984–1999)," Shenglan Zhou analyzes the schoolbooks used in Chinese literacy classes during the Patriotic Education Campaign of the late 20th century. Conducting critical discourse analysis, she demonstrates how textbooks present Mao Zedong as an authoritative and charismatic political leader who always maintained close connection to the people, made visible by his frugal lifestyle. The education system thus cultivated a positive memory of Maoism among young children in the 1980s and 1990s, omitting all polemic decisions taken during his tenure and providing an imbricated connection between education and propaganda. As the author notes, the Chinese Communist Party acknowledged the necessity of reasserting Mao's relevance for the younger generation after the Tiananmen protests, seeing it as a way of maintaining the party's authority and aligning the youth's perception of the past with the official narrative.

Next, Mazlum Kemal Dagdelen focuses on the militaristic discourse of Turkish Cypriot children's magazines. Examining them in the context of violence on the island that brought Greece and Turkey to the brink of war in 1967–68, he considers how print media targeting children were used as propaganda tools to

promote the army as a national protectional assemblage and to steer hate for the enemy. The analysis demonstrates how the sanctity of sacrifice is a recurring topic in these texts, illustrating how they were committed to persuading new generations of the need to honor the sacrifices of those who preceded them.

In the third article, "Propagandistic Use of Fact-Checking in Health Crisis: The Case of Pro-Government Fact-Checking in Hong Kong," Mengzhe Feng examines progovernment fact-checking in Hong Kong and analyzes how it was used to propagate official narratives and censor those who opposed the official policies of pandemic management. Through content analysis, the article reveals how the professional tone adopted by a progovernment fact-checker offered readers transparent and truthful sources while labeling dissent a threat to society. Overall, she demonstrates how fact-checking can become part of the authoritarian discourses used to silence dissonant voices, central to the legitimization of the approval of what is presented as anti–fake news legislation.

Also investigating digital communication during the pandemic, Kedi Zhou's article, "Jiangshanjiao, Do You Get Your Period?: Understanding Feminist Expressions Against State Propaganda in China," discusses how two female (Jiangshanjiao) and male virtual heroes developed by the Communist Youth League, and disseminated on Weibo, were strategically appropriated by grassroot feminist movements to express solidarity for female health workers whose demands for access to sanitary pads and tampons were neglected by the government. Based on the analysis of posts on Weibo and interviews with young women who posted content with the hashtag #Jiangshanjiao, the article discusses the emotions expressed online by such activists and places the movement in the broader context of feminist online engagement in China.

The final article, "'She Played All the Pregnant Women!': Russian Disinformation, Symbolic Annihilation, and the Mariupol Hospital Attack," by Valentyna Shapovalova, addresses disinformation in the context of the invasion of Ukraine. The article investigates the coverage by Russian state-aligned media of the bombing of a maternity and children's hospital in Mariupol in October 2022. It discusses how fact-checking played an active role in Russian disinformation about the event, with supposed facts used to support the claim that the building was no longer used as a hospital. Through a feminist lens, the author uncovers how women and men were represented in official media coverage, demonstrating that women were mostly erased or labeled as fake and stripped of agency, while men were presented as credible sources.

Together, the articles in this Special Section help us grasp how propaganda permeates the current environment. They call on us to understand where propaganda lives on and to pay special heed to the venues in which it does so, largely unaware of those around it.

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